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## **An absent presence: Separated child migrants' caring practices and the fortified neoliberal state**

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## **An absent presence: Separated child migrants' caring practices and the fortified neoliberal state**

This paper explores the ambivalent positioning of separated child migrants in the UK with a focus on the care that they provide for each other. Drawing on interview data with state and non-state adult stakeholders involved in the immigration-welfare nexus, we consider how children's care practices are viewed and represented. We argue that separated children's caring practices assume an absent presence in the discourses mobilised by these actors: either difficult to articulate or represented in negative and morally-laden terms, reflective of the UK's 'hostile environment' towards migrants and advanced capitalist constructions of childhood. Such an examination sheds light on the complex state attempts to manage the care and migration regimes, and the way that care can serve as a way of making and marking inclusions and exclusions. Here we emphasise the political consequences for separated child migrants in an age of neoliberal state retrenchment from public provision of care and rising xenophobic nationalism.

**Keywords:** Austerity, care regimes, migration regimes, separated child migrants, unaccompanied minors

### **Introduction**

This paper explores adult stakeholders' accounts of the care that separated child migrants<sup>1</sup> in the UK provide for each other. By placing accounts of this care within an analysis of neoliberal welfare retrenchment and the UK's 'hostile environment', it contributes to conceptualisations of the shifting interface of migration and care regimes (Williams 2014, Humphris and Sigona 2017). It fills a significant gap in knowledge by placing separated child migrants' care for each other directly at the heart of these regimes, shedding light on the consequences of how this care is understood and represented by adult stakeholders.

Separated child migration is a highly charged and emotive issue, that has become a focus of media coverage, policy development and academic scholarship in recent years. This figure of the separated child migrant is often understood in public imaginaries as lonely and traumatised,

migrating without responsible and caring adults, and evokes concern, empathy, and even moral indignity (Heidbrink and Statz 2017).<sup>2</sup>

In the UK, as with other countries, such figurations have prompted a wide range of insightful, research studies, policies, and provisions about both good practice and limits to the care provided by receiving countries. However, in the bulk of this work, separated children are assumed to simply be the *recipients* of care, with adults – either as volunteers or representatives of the state – assumed to be the care providers.

This is not unusual given that in capitalist states of the global North, ‘the child’ is constituted as essentially and overwhelmingly dependent. Such assumptions haunt conceptualisations of care where, to borrow from Burman (2017), “descriptions” of the care of children by adults become “prescriptions” for normal, even good, childhoods. Despite increasingly detailed and nuanced conceptualisations of care, when children are recognised as providing care, this is often treated as “non-normative” as in the case of young carers (Rosen and Newberry 2018, O’Dell et al. 2010).

In contrast, a growing body of work focusing primarily on the global South, highlights children’s active participation in caring labour, not only out of necessity, but because they are expected, and often want, to do so (Abebe 2007, Katz 2004, Robson 2004). This work demonstrates that children have the capacity to care and often are involved in the multifaceted set of practical, emotional, physical, accommodational, and economic caring practices (Baldassar and Merla 2014) through which we “maintain, continue, and repair” ourselves, others, and our worlds (Tronto 1993, 102). Indeed prior research indicates separated migrant children *may* care through provision of remittances (Heidbrink 2014), information sharing (Wells 2011), and language brokering (Crafter et al. 2017). This prior research is framed by concepts other than care, such as social capital and social network theory, leaving open questions about the dynamics

and facets of care, how conflicting ideas about childhood and care are organised, and what this means for the care of and by separated child migrants.

Prompted by empirical evidence of children's contributions as care providers and theoretical efforts to make sense of this care (e.g. see Magazine and Sánchez 2007, Abebe 2007, Rosen and Newberry 2018), here we draw on our research with a range of adult stakeholders involved in caring for and about separated child migrants to consider what these accounts tell us about separated children's caring practices and the implications for welfare and asylum in the UK's self-proclaimed "hostile environment".

### **Care in the UK's "hostile environment"**

By the end of 2016, children made up just over 40% (Unicef 2016) of the 65.6 million people forcibly displaced by war, conflict, and persecution, and close to half of all refugees internationally (UNHCR 2017). Among some of the most precarious are the rising numbers of children migrating without parents or primary carers. Whilst it is difficult to calculate precise numbers of separated children due to the "adultist" nature of much demographic data where children are often invisible (White et al. 2011), UNICEF (2017) estimates that at least 300,000 unaccompanied children migrated across national borders in 2015–2016, with 11,918 entering Europe in the first half of 2017 alone.<sup>3</sup>

The UK has taken in very few separated children, with official figures indicating there were only 4,560 "looked after" asylum-seeking children in England in 2017 (DFE 2017).<sup>4</sup> Against a backdrop of limited opportunities to come to the UK through legalised routes, and state attempts to block irregular migration, separated children continue to risk their lives attempting to access the UK (Crafter and Rosen forthcoming). Upon arrival, they may encounter both state actors,

including those involved in care and migration regimes, as well as non-state actors such as those involved in charitable organisations.

The UK's approach to separated children needs to be understood within the context of over a decade of exclusionary changes in the UK's immigration regime (Anderson 2016). These have been largely aimed at reducing migration, decreasing asylum applications, and reducing social support for migrants through the creation of "a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants", in the words of then Home Secretary Teresa May in 2012 and often repeated during her Prime Ministership.<sup>5</sup> This has included cuts to legal aid for all but the most exceptional immigration cases, and the now infamous Home Office vans with "Go Home" emblazoned on their side (Jones et al. 2017). The focus on "illegal" migrants has slipped into an "autochthonic politics of belonging" (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2017), with suspicion directed at *all* migrants positioned racially and culturally as outsiders.<sup>6</sup>

As Williams (2014) argues persuasively, migration regimes need to be understood in their interaction with care regimes. Care regimes determine how care is provided and where, including whether it is commodified, marketized, state-supplied, and/or familialist in expectation and provision. Migration regimes simultaneously construct rules about who has the right to what provision, and who can and is expected to provide care labour and under what conditions.

Much of the UK's current care regime is simultaneously marked by rapid marketisation and by a decade of austerity and retrenchments. This includes and has an impact on, services dedicated to the care of children. Marketisation is one of the most significant changes to the post-war settlement (Brennan et al. 2012), with neo-liberalisation leading to a shift from expectations for state or local provision of care to the transformation of care into a commodity to be bought and sold by private, for-profit companies. In children's services, for instance, policy changes in 2014-2015, opened up the possibility for privatisation, allowing the large multi-nationals G4S

and Serco to be granted contracts for provision of children's services with the possibility of profit making guaranteed through contracting out of administrative and estates services (Jones 2015, and, in relation to child asylum seekers and private care and legal services see Humphris and Sigona 2017). In some cases such contracting out is viewed by local authorities as "virtuous necessity" (Clarke 2013) in response to central government funding cuts in the austerity climate following in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2007-8 and subsequent "global slump" (McNally 2010). While austerity is increasingly the target of criticism from across the political spectrum, the re-orientation in care regimes introduced under its mantle remain largely unchecked.<sup>7</sup>

It is here that the interaction of care and migration regimes becomes most apparent, as heated public debates often end up blaming migrants for economic recession and austerity policies (Caviedes 2015, Vickers and Rutter 2016, Anderson 2016). In the context of rapid contraction of public provision of care, the logic of 'protecting our own' first and foremost is often used to rhetorically justify limits to migrants' access to care provision. Indeed, a raft of policies compel "ordinary citizens" to become "border-guards" (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2017), engaging in acts of everyday bordering such as identification checks for access to health, education, and housing.

Separated migrant children occupy a particularly ambiguous position in such a climate. On the one hand, they face a concern over their welfare and protection as children. Separated child migrants are largely protected from exclusionary measures to accessing social care provision, given the duty of care catalysed by the UK's commitments as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. On the other hand, Prime Minister Theresa May's proclamation of a hostile environment supports fortification of borders for the nominal protection of citizens. This has the effect of rendering migrants, including separated children, as 'suspect', with their status

as children questioned, often leading to their exclusion from welfare provisions because of their status as migrants (Chase 2013b, Crawley 2011). This tension is illustrative of the irreconcilable contradiction that lies at the heart of liberal democracies between a commitment to universal equality with particular obligations towards vulnerable groups, and a context where rights are both de facto and de jure limited by territorial, political, legal, and economic borders (Nail 2016).<sup>8</sup> As our previous analysis of tabloid coverage demonstrates, linking “deservingness” of care provision to the status of childhood is politically risky as a politics of belonging and one that is easily undermined (Rosen and Crafter 2018).

Prior research has demonstrated that contradictions between care and suspicion underlie local variations in policy and practice towards separated children (Wade 2011) and discrepancies between stated policy goals and separated children’s experiences (Chase and Allsopp 2017, Kohli 2014, Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh 2015). Professionals working within migration and care regimes often face contradictory imperatives, cost-cutting on the one hand and ensuring the best interests of child migrants on the other. As Humphris and Sigona (2017, 15) argue, marketisation and austerity policies have progressively decreased frontline workers’ “room to manoeuvre” in efforts to ensure separated children’s well-being. Overall, however, little is known about how tensions between care and migration regimes in the context of neo-liberalisation and border fortification manifest in relation to separated children’s own caring practices – the focus of this article.

## **Methodology**

The data in this article comes from a small-scale, exploratory case study (Yin 2003). Taking a broad and iterative approach, we began by mapping the sites in which separated children encounter and engage with care. Such connections neither begin or end in encounters with the



state, indicating that the nation-state is not irrelevant as unit of analysis but that there is a need to move beyond methodological nationalism (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). As such, the boundaries of our case were broad: adult stakeholders involved with separated migrant children in the immigration-welfare nexus in England,<sup>9</sup> whilst taking transnational personal and geopolitical relations into account.

We engaged in convenience sampling, supported by snowballing techniques. Every effort was made to recruit participants from the widest possible variety of disciplines/professions and sites, albeit this being a small, non-representative study. This does not reduce the reliability of such a study, or of “minor” and partial data more generally (Katz 1996), as it can highlight assumptions, identify emerging concerns, and allow exploration of the conditions of data production and its effects.

This article focuses on data generated through 13 semi-structured interviews with adult stakeholders involved with separated migrant children who worked or volunteered in a variety of statutory services and voluntary sectors. These included people from third sector organisations (2); social work (3); foster care (2); children’s services management (1); laws (3); police (1); and borders enforcement (1). Interviewees were provided with information about the project and ethics prior to the interview. Although a number of our interviewees could be considered high profile and therefore easily identifiable, we have retained the practice of ensuring anonymity through the use of pseudonyms and stripping data of identifiable features. Further, our interlocutors were all given the option of approving their transcript prior to data analysis. Interviews focused on three key themes: (1) experiences working with separated children, (2) participants’ understandings and reflections on separated children’s experiences of care and caring, and (3) their perspectives on policy and practice approaches to separated child migrants in the UK.

We began analysis by mining the data to find any instances where participants explicitly identified child migrants as providers of care. Following this, we approached the data in line with Baldassar & Merla's (2014) typology of care, using this theoretically-informed analytic lens to identify the types of activities that child migrants are involved in which might be considered as care. In brief, they conceptualise care as a multi-dimensional set of emotional, practical, physical, and economic practices; characterized by a generalized expectation of reciprocity; and embedded within relations of power and ethical obligations. While we recognize that the interviews with stakeholders are not objective and total descriptions of the social world, we also argue that this does not mean that they are simply discursive fictions with little to say about the real world. Thus, we approach our analysis on the understanding that while such accounts are partial – professionally, ethically, and socially situated in discourse, they refer to real people and real events and, however incompletely, shed some light on separated children's caring practices (Sayer 2000).<sup>10</sup> Finally, we identified themes using constant comparison as an analytic tool. Recognizing that the richness of data generated with diverse stakeholders lies in its local specificity, and negative instances, as well as similarities, here we draw out the ways accounts confirm, extend, and contradict each other (O'Connell 2013).

### **The care of children by children: an absent presence**

In this section, we argue that children's care of each other is largely absent from adult stakeholders' understandings and accounts of care; however, through close attention we can see that it does achieve a presence, however fleetingly. As such, the care of children, by children, can be understood as occupying an ambiguous position for adult stakeholders: *an absent presence*.

All interviewees provided lengthy and detailed accounts of care provision *for* separated children in the UK. The focus of these accounts ranged substantially, largely dependent on the

interviewees' professional experiences and networks. Interviewees spoke about what has more traditionally been framed as care provision, such as legal services to help access formal care; “*welfare talks*” provided by the UK’s new trafficking task force; and foster care provision. Others emphasised the emotional forms of care they and their colleagues provided. While the interviewees did not necessarily use the terminology of “caring for” to describe these practices, they all expressed a deep sense of concern and “care about” separated child migrants (see Bowlby 2012 for elucidation on the relationship between caring for and about).

Respondents differed significantly in their assessment of the UK’s care provision for separated children, with some stressing the country’s generosity, “*robust procedures*” for safeguarding and care, and solid system of support and entitlements for migrants. These more positive assessments largely came from those stakeholders working within state services and speaking about their own profession’s practice.

Other interviewees offered more critical commentary, often pointing to the their own efforts were constrained. For instance, third sector interviewees expressed scepticism about the state’s purported concern for children’s well-being. In pointing to the inadequacies of state provision, they suggested this necessitates that voluntary organisations either take up the slack or “*try and get support from statutory services and professionals [who are] maybe not doing what they should be doing*”, as Sofia (a project manager for a migrant charity) commented. One interviewee from the police force commented on limitations in social care provision indicating that migrant children may feel “*unwelcome*” in state foster care which can lead to children “*going missing*”.

Despite these differences, the contrast between the detailed descriptions of adult’s caring practices and the difficulty most respondents found in discussing children’s care for children was striking, a stutter in their otherwise animated and in-depth explanations. When asked who is

involved with caring for separated children, none of the interviewees inaugurated their discussion with reference to children's care for children, focusing instead on adult kin and the state or its representatives. However, when asked directly, interviewees agreed that separated children provided care for others. Interviewees from the charity sector, particularly those who frame their work as a form of participatory practice, were perhaps the most comfortable discussing children's caring practices. In the main, however, interviewees found it quite difficult to articulate with any detail how children's care of others is initiated, maintained, and organized.

For some, the interview seemed to be the first time they had thought more explicitly about if and how children might care for each other:

*Interviewer: Children caring for other children in the absence of adults: I don't know whether you have any experience of that...?*

*Elaine (border enforcement staff): No, but I can imagine it happens. I can imagine it happens partly because of the closeness of communities.*

This was a largely self-acknowledged gap in their own knowledge. In reflecting on this gap, Rose (a state social worker) noted:

*"Everybody always thinks that they're the most important in these children's lives. I think we know very...I think there's a huge side of their lives that we don't know about."*

In mining the interviews for instances where children's caring practices did achieve a presence, however fleetingly, we found examples of separated migrant children providing practical care for each other, such as advising on strategies for achieving asylum or dividing up social reproductive tasks in the Calais camp in ways which carried through for those who made it to England. Olivia (a lawyer for a charity) commented:

*“If the little kids stood in the queue to get their phone charged, then the big kid you know helped them get food, stand in the food queue. Defend them...you know; because there were lots of dreadful fights.”*

Interlocutors did not describe the character, texture or form of children’s emotional care for each other, however this was implicit in their accounts of the depth of children’s affective connections. Describing the process of placing a group of girls who had come to England together into foster care, Katie (a staff member at an advocacy organisation) explained:

*“They were all being taken apart, literally being dragged apart, screaming, holding hands with their friends saying, I’m never going to see you again. Because they will have developed really, really close bonds with those girls.”*

Such emotional care between children was perhaps the least articulatable, particularly as it may have taken place outside of adult organised spaces which were largely characterised by adult-child interactions. (For further discussion of the character and conceptualisation of separated children’s caring practices, see Rosen 2018).

When prompted to reflect upon and verbalise understandings of children’s care for each other, many interlocutors rapidly shifted into a search for explanations. Explanations took two contradictory forms: either rooting children’s caring practices in extraordinary circumstances which led to extraordinary responses or treating it as a ‘natural’ phenomenon of youth or culture. In the case of the former, interviewees explained the care children provided for each other on migration journeys and in refugee camps, such as Calais, as resulting from the absence of adult kin or state provision of care. Children’s care of children was seen to make sense as emerging from this void. For instance, Rose (a state social worker) commented: *“They do [care for each other], they have to,”* and Olivia (a lawyer for a charity) observed: *“Their home was the Jungle and their family was their peers.”* Here the sense was that children’s care for each not only made

sense in the context of parental absence, but that it mapped on to more recognisable forms of kin care. Most evident in this regard was a focus in the discussion about siblings caring for each other, with a number of interviewees commenting on efforts of local authorities to keep siblings together. Amongst non-kin children, shared experiences of migration and common ethnicity were noted as being key to the formation of ongoing caring relationships which lasted into children's entry into the UK. Steph (a state social worker) explained: *"I've also noticed somehow they create travelling buddies...They form a relationship, even when they are...they're travelling in the truck from Calais, it's the two of them."*

Whilst children's caring relationships with each other were largely viewed as a necessary, even tactical, response to untenable circumstances, the emphasis on the extraordinary highlights the exceptionalism of these caring relationships in stakeholders' understandings. For instance, following one of the most detailed and empathetic accounts of children's care for each other, Katie (advocate) commented:

*"He'd been really well protected I think by having the older kids there and you could see that. So I guess there was that, which was quite good to see. Although ridiculous that it had to be 16- and 17-year olds that were doing that rather than...actual people who weren't children themselves."*

Children, this suggests, may have to care for each other, but all things being equal children should not be in put in the position of having to provide care. Further, these explanations derived their force from an underlying assumption that there was something fundamentally 'unchildlike' or undesirable about children providing care for each other.

Not all participants turned to narratives of precarity and exceptionalism to explain children's caring practices. In many of the interviews, there was also an unstated assumption that it is natural for young people to band together in child-based friendship groups or even "*gangs*". This

turns on the presumption that, beyond family, children have affinities first and foremost with other children. Reflecting a “generational order” (Alanen 2011) which instantiates sharp divisions between adults and children, the presumed naturalness of age-based friendships become the expectation for relationships in the absence of multi-generational kin.

As the comment from Elaine (border enforcement) above gestures to, ‘culture’ was also given explanatory force. She stated:

*“Certain cultures are very much focused on you look after everyone in the family and you don't really think about yourself. It's all sort of the next person etc. So I would say that traditionally Africans and in the Asian culture as well, people will look after each other. So it may well be the case that children are having to look after... another...”*

Others also made recourse to cultural, or even racialised, explanations. For instance, Emma (children’s services manager) commented: *“Young Albanians like to live in a group.”* Whilst these comments meant that care was not treated simply as the purview and responsibility of adults, here caring children seemed to make sense, but only through their constitution as cultural Others.

Despite differences in the explanations provided, interviewees’ rapid turn to questions as to *why* children care for children is suggestive in and of itself. Practices which seem banal and routine are rarely treated as requiring explanation in everyday conversation. Interviews are rife with enthymeme’s, short hand comments which the speaker assumes, either implicitly or explicitly, will be understood by the listener and necessitate little interrogation or elucidation. In contrast, the search for explanations to account for children’s caring practices gestures to their unusual character for the interviewees, giving further weight to our assertion of the absent presence of such practices. This is perhaps unsurprising given that both scholarship and policy has largely focused on the care of children by adults, even in the case of unaccompanied children.

Further, care has often been conceptualized and enacted in paternalistic ways (Watson et al. 2004) with hegemonic understandings and structuring of childhood deriving from assumptions based on idealized childhoods in advanced capitalist countries that children should be cared for, rather than do the caring (Rosen and Newberry 2018).

### **Positioning the care of children by children**

In response to prompts to speak further about children's caring practices, our interlocutors also moved into evaluative discussions. These appraisals of children's caring practices took three general forms. First, in keeping with explanations of children's caring practices as a reasonable response to the state of exceptionalism that separated migrant children found themselves, some interlocutors portrayed this care in largely positive terms, as a helpful and necessary evil in the absence of adult/state care. Here, the emphasis was less on appraising the quality or nature of the care, as might be expected with more normatively constituted or professionally provided forms of care, and instead offered assessments of the depth of children's commitment to each other and their emotional intimacy. For instance, Elaine (border enforcement) noted the "*closeness of communities*" and Rose (state social worker) commented: "*I've seen some amazing cases of siblings caring for each other. The utter devotion between the siblings.*"

A second theme in the appraisals was the view that children's caring practices were desirable, *but* only in so far as they could be characterised as part of a developmental process supported by adults. For instance, Steph (a state social worker) noted:

*"When you've got a child and they've got a friend and you think that it is a good friendship, you will do whatever that you have to do to support that friendship. And our foster carers are doing that...And with the right amount of care and support they become very responsible and we all end up benefiting from them...and they will become the best citizens ever."*



Appraising children's caring practices like this gave them a positive valence but in a way that constituted care provision as synonymous with adulthood. Children, in these accounts, were consigned to be *developing* providers of care, with the ability to be responsible and care for themselves and others only in so far as the proper adult support could make this possible. Such accounts of the developing child are not unexpected, given the stranglehold of developmental psychology on understandings of childhood (Burman 2017) and the indexing of responsibility and (good) citizenship to adulthood, albeit as an elusive status from which migrant, unemployed and other "Failed Citizens" are often excluded (Anderson 2013). The result, however, was that such appraisals embodied a certain tension: recognising that separated child migrants had made long and arduous migration journeys without adults which necessarily involved caring for others and, at the same time, inscribing care on to the social position of adulthood and marking it as the constitutive outside of childhood. Notions of the developing child also dovetail with progress narratives linked to (neo)colonialism (Balagopalan 2019, Rollo 2016), and dominant Western constructions of what childhood is and should be, and these likely also underpinned the interlocutor's comments which positioned migrants as cultural Others. In this case, the purportedly not-yet-responsible child is doubly bound by their status as migrant outsider and not-yet-responsible citizen.

A third evaluative theme was one of suspicion, with children's care practices and relationships with each other subject to distrust. Appraisals of this type took a generalised form, where children's connections with each other articulated in Hobbesian terms such as feral "*packs*", "*gangs*", or exclusionary even violent groupings. For instance, Emma (children's services manager) made links between children's networks, ethnic groupings and violent conflict: "*The Albanian young people, they form their own networks. A little while in [name of UK town] we had an issue about conflict between African Caribbean boys, Albanian kids.*" Such comments

indicated a sense of anxiety amongst some of the adult stakeholders, particularly when confronted with groups of separated children. Care within these children's networks, or even its possibility, became invisible, as these articulations constituted at least some separated children as threatening Others, and often in highly racialised terms. While the constitution of separated children in such terms fits into the hostile environment and the ways in which attitudes towards migration are tightly bound with systemic racism (De Genova 2017), discourses which we do not seek to perpetuate, we do flag up that these anxieties are *also* indicative of the intersectional character of social being and the ways that practices of care can be laden with concern and reciprocity simultaneously with power, violence, and exploitation (Bowlby 2012).

Such evaluations also took more specific form in relation to, *inter alia*, “*going missing*”, criminal activity, and remittances. Going missing from state care was a key motif in the interviews and a significant cause for concern. Here, children's connections with other migrant young people were deemed to be problematic in so far as they facilitated circumvention of the state care system. Emma (children's services manager) remarked: “*These young people are not really missing, away, absent; it's because they have friends and family in the country. They have relatives who they go and stay with. And because when they first arrive, if you ask them, do you have any relatives; they all say no, or say they don't have any.*” As Emma's comments indicate, rather than characterising children's (caring) networks as an understandable or desirable response to their extraordinary situations, these were instead deemed to be complicit in abuses of care and migration regimes.

Without dismissing the concerns raised by these interviewees about the safety and well-being of children involved, further comments from David (police force) provide some insights into the complexity of why children ‘go missing’: “*I mean when you see the reasons they go missing it's generally they say, we don't feel welcome. We feel you're just seeing us as a job.*” As a result,

going missing may not simply signal a slippage into criminality. It can instead, or simultaneously, reflect a desire to be with other separated children with whom they have caring relationships, but whom they were separated from once in the UK care system.

Children's practice of providing remittances for transnational family members or repayments to smugglers is another example of caring practices which were considered suspicious by some of our interlocutors. Emma (children's services manager) hypothesized:

*“Probably some of them are sending some of their pocket money home or as well...They have to have Instagram. I'm sure they have more information than I have about young people and young people's progressing money to their relatives.”*

Sitting alongside her discussion of the generosity of social care provision in the UK, this comment gestured towards a sense of being taken advantage of, facilitated by children's care networks. For other interlocutors, suspicion was less directed at separated children and more towards communities which 'expected' such financial activity from them. As Mike (programme manager at an adoption and fostering charity) commented, there is a *“a strong sense from all professionals involved, including foster carers, of wanting to relieve young people of that kind of burden and that responsibility.”* He noted, however, that for separated children themselves, providing economic care for others is *“a very important part of their narrative”*. Yet for many adult stakeholders, ideas about childhood in advanced capitalist countries dominated, not only requiring protection from the ostensibly adult world of economic activity but as fundamentally removed from its operations (Spyrou, Rosen, and Cook 2019). As Mike indicated, this stands in contrast to the way separated children may view themselves (see also Heidbrink and Statz 2017) or their embedding in and constitution through the operations of global capital including through social reproductive labour and indebtedness (Rosen and Newberry 2018).

This is not, however, to suggest that any of our interlocutors evaluated children's caring practices in singular ways. As Rose (state social worker) was at pains to point out, separated child migrants are not a homogenous group and assumptions about care, support, and social relations vary incredibly, albeit in her account this is based on assumption of shared national characteristics. She commented:

*"I mean it's just a cross section of international life. So I've had wonderful support, where they've been supportive of each other. And also you also have...cultural variations. The Eritreans and the Vietnamese and the Afghans, they act in very different ways. So I wouldn't dream of knowing all of those, either."*

Other interviewees were less explicit about diversities among separated children, however they moved between these three broad themes in appraising children's caring practices. In part, this may link to the actual diversity of separated children, but we suggest it also reflects the diversity of the participants' professional roles and their navigation of the hostile environment within different institutional imperatives. For instance, those representing the state had to make decisions about the provision of state welfare in the increasingly neo-liberal context whilst others may have had more scope to question such policies or different agendas to fulfil.

Shifting views of children's caring practices also relates to the malleability of 'the child' figure, with its dynamic constitution from "at risk" to "the risk" (Heidbrink 2014). This can be seen, for example, in the ways that Steph (state social worker) moved between recognising the importance of children's friendships and treating them as "*gang like*". However, shifting discursive constructions of separated children cause tensions for adult stakeholders, who must navigate between ideas about protecting the "at risk" child, including through developing their independent caring practices, and protecting others from the "risky" child through immigration control, age contestations, and detention/deportation.

## **Managing the care-migration nexus in a ‘hostile’ neoliberal environment**

In this section, we place our interlocutors’ accounts of the caring practices of separated child migrants within an analysis of neoliberal welfare retrenchment and rising xenophobic nationalism. We argue that without understanding more about separated migrant children’s caring practices, including the meanings and values which are attributed to it by various stakeholders within England’s contemporary migration and care regimes, and without recognising its centrality in separated children’s lives, even policy and practice framed by a concern for well-being can have detrimental impacts for separated children.

Adult stakeholders are embedded in a context in which care serves as a way of making and marking inclusions and exclusions: who is recognised as deserving of state supported care and in what manner. This form of everyday bordering reflects the shift from simply “gatekeeping at the border” to “gatekeeping access to services” (Van Der Leun 2006). One way the UK has limited spending on care in the context of neoliberal austerity is by shifting the balance away from universal commitments to targeted or conditional social programmes (Lambie-Mumford and Green 2015), based on categorisations of worthy and non-worthy recipients. In the context of the UK’s hostile environment such worthiness is directly linked to migration and generational status: the deserving separated child is currently set over and against other migrants, including children travelling with adult family members. Separated child migrants are held up as particularly vulnerable victims, seemingly all alone and in need of protection and even rescue, concerns which our interlocutors invoked in a myriad of ways.

Whilst this seemingly assures a better position for separated children in comparison to other migrants, here we wish to draw attention to its negative consequences, particularly in their interface with children’s own caring practices. It is not that such support is unnecessary or

undesirable, quite the opposite. However, the concatenation of deservingness with vulnerability and childhood discursively bolsters withdraw of support for adult migrants, particularly in the face of state retrenchment from direct care provision. These adults are rendered as drains on fiscal systems and simultaneously as neoliberal subjects, responsibilised for their own fates and those of their children (Heidbrink and Statz 2017). This can end up redoubling on itself, inadvertently hurting children. As our interviewees commented, separated children who reunited with adult family members in the UK received little or no state support once placed with kin.

Such approaches also run the risk of infantilising children, treating them as essentially and fundamentally dependent on the care and generosity of adult citizens in the UK and negating the caring capacities they have actively demonstrated. This reduction of children to a state of dependence is paternalistic to say the least, with implications for the status of children more generally in so far as this re-inscribes normative figurations of the helpless and essentially needy child (Rosen and Newberry 2018). Further, to go from making decisions and caring for other children to having social workers, in the words of Tanak (manager for private fostering agency), “*decide the frequency, venue, timings and every such thing*” for separated children’s engagement with each other, creates significant discordance. This can also have the effect of rendering practices which have enabled separated children to navigate precarious migration and settlement journeys as problematic, even traumatic, leading to efforts to stop children from caring to ostensibly give an “unchildlike child” their childhood.

Conversely, caring practices, if they are concatenated with adulthood, may be viewed as evidence of adulthood and used to contest a child’s right to education, health, and accommodation as a child. We have some anecdotal evidence to this effect, and certainly this resonates with prior research which sees separated children’s participation in activities constituted as “adult-like”, such as political involvement and sexual activity (Crawley 2011),

being the grounds for age contestation. The overarching point here is that the categories of ‘separated child migrant’ and ‘adult migrant’ – just like those of citizen, non-citizen, and failed citizen (Anderson 2013) – have an elasticity, allowing them to be mobilised as part of efforts to redraw the boundaries of state support for care in a fortified neoliberal state.

Secondly, the austerity climate, combined with the concentration of separated children in local authorities (LAs) such as Kent and Croydon, has also led to the creation of the National Transfer Scheme. This central government policy represents an effort to ensure “a more even distribution of caring responsibilities across the country” by allowing LAs to volunteer to take responsibility for separated children who arrive in other areas.<sup>11</sup> Referred to mistakenly by many of our interviewees as the “*national dispersal scheme*”, such language is telling as to the climate in which this policy emerged, invoking as it does a sense of “besiegement” (Hage 2016, Rosen and Crafter 2018) in the face of a perceived onslaught or mob of migrants. The policy revolves around the notion that separated children are burdens (see also Humphris and Sigona 2017), representing a cost to be borne by LAs in the absence of adult kin to take responsibility. Cost sharing efficiently in an austere climate, and here the logic of retrenchment remains unquestioned, takes discursive precedence over recognition of separated children as human beings fleeing perilous situations, as contributors to care relations but likewise as interdependent beings requiring support as part of a project of common good.

Our interlocutors had mixed views on the impacts of the scheme, with some arguing that it was a reasonable strategy in the face of limited LA resources and others expressing concern that children were being placed in areas with little experience or cultural and linguistic resources for supporting migrant children. Our interlocutor’s comments, like discussions more broadly, have paid little attention to children’s caring relationships with other children, however. The placement of separated children is made on the basis of LA cost-shouldering agreements and a familialist

logic grounded on assumptions that children cannot and do not have important and enduring care relationships with non-kin children. Our data shows that this has led to traumatic separations of children who have formed deep emotional attachments and caring relationships with each other, with children “*being dragged apart, screaming*” in Katie’s evocative words. In effect, foster care placements which disregard children’s care for each other, whether through the transfer scheme or otherwise, amplify separations that have already occurred along the migration journey. Whilst our data indicates that some charities and social workers make efforts to support communication between children through mobile technologies, this is limited at best when children are being transferred to LAs across the country with little knowledge as to where and how they can be reached.

As our discussion about going missing indicated above, without taking into account the importance of these relationships, foster care placements are precarious at best. Separated children do not always accept placement apart from those with whom they have caring relationships. Yet, in going under the radar to meet again and potentially becoming irregular, separated children *may* become further marginalised. As irregular migrants, children face precarious and uncertain living conditions (Cvajner and Sciortino 2010), increased chances of exploitation, and fewer avenues for exercising civil, social, and political rights (Bloch, Sigona, and Zetter 2011).

Third, in the climate of neoliberal austerity the state and local authorities are increasingly withdrawing from direct care provision. While the state may absent itself, or create the conditions for market intervention, the existential and social necessity for care does not diminish. It is the conditions under which care is materialised that changes. In the context of neo-liberalising care regimes, care provision is increasingly being individualised, with responsibility for providing care devolved to individuals who must “pick up the slack” (Dowling and Harvie 2014) through



their own labour or purchase in a marketized realm. On the one hand, we might ask whether separated children's care for each other is shoring up inadequate provision from the state, not only on their migration journeys, as one of our interlocutors asserted, but also in the UK. Here, long standing questions raised by feminist scholars about the contribution of unremunerated care labour to capital accumulation and staving off crises of social reproduction<sup>12</sup> become relevant (Rosen and Newberry 2018, Dowling and Harvie 2014). On the other hand, this raises questions about the tenor and quality of care that separated children are able to provide. In the context of austerity Britain, people more generally are struggling to provide care, as the unprecedented levels of personal indebtedness to fund social reproduction (Adkins 2017) and rapid rise in food insecurity and the use of food banks can attest (Lambie-Mumford and Green 2015). In providing care that is deeply hidden, separated children do not have the potential to be supported through the state (e.g. through welfare benefits and programmes in support of care provision). In contexts of limited resources, marginalization and discrimination (Rosen and Crafter 2018, Hopkins and Hill 2010), and extreme precarity (Chase 2013a), separated children's caring practices are significantly constrained with implications for both well-being and equality.

## **Conclusion**

In the above discussion, we have traced the ways that adult stakeholders understand and articulate separated migrant children's care for each other, arguing that these practices have assumed an absent presence in their accounts. We neither seek to valorise this care, nor offer it up as an example of trauma and lost childhoods. Instead, we point to the ways that its material presence, and discursive absence, fundamentally shape adult stakeholder's approaches to the tensions between and within neo-liberalising migration and care regimes, or securitisation and protection. Neglect of these caring practices not only impoverishes understandings of migration

and care, but – more crucially - have the effect of stigmatising, marginalising, and harming separated migrant children particularly in contexts of marketisation of state provision and rising xenophobic nationalism. As such, there is a need, both intellectually and politically, to recognise and better understand the care of and by separated children.

Here, however, we end on a cautionary note. Whilst taking children's caring practices into account is necessary, there is simultaneously a need to remain vigilant that this knowledge does not provide a rationale that care provision for separated children is not needed or that children's informal networks can be harnessed for free caring labour. Such concerns may seem unfounded given pervasive views of children as essentially dependent. However, there is a history of research about people's strategies for caring and survival in conditions of extreme precarity being mobilized in the service of state retrenchment and new forms of accumulation (Spyrou, Rosen, and Cook 2019). The point is not to justify treatment for separated migrant children that we would never accept for others, but to learn from separated children's experiences to improve the conditions of their lives, and those of other marginalised groups.

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<sup>1</sup> People under 18-years-old, who are migrating without primary parents/care givers are referred to in legal and policy contexts with the dehumanizing term: 'unaccompanied minors'. In contrast, we use the term 'separated child migrants' to highlight that many children maintain transnational relationships or reunite with parents/primary carers at various points in the migration process, and are often accompanied by other kin and non-kin adults and children (Rosen, forthcoming).

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<sup>2</sup> Public imaginaries are not homogenous, however. Separated children are also vilified or treated with suspicion, including as adult imposters intent on duping nation states to access social benefits (Rosen and Crafter 2018).

<sup>3</sup> <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/60348>

<sup>4</sup> These figures are unlikely to be an accurate reflection of the real numbers of separated children, however, as some Local Authorities struggle to record accurate data and some children avoid entering the asylum system (Simon, Setter, and Holmes 2016).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/nov/28/hostile-environment-the-hardline-home-office-policy-tearing-families-apart>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.redpepper.org.uk/talking-about-migrants-is-a-dogwhistle-way-of-talking-about-race/>

<sup>7</sup> There has been a 40% cut in central government funding for local authorities since 2010, with many local authorities facing financial crisis or bankruptcy (as happened with Northamptonshire). Despite raising council taxes, local authorities state they will be £5 billion short of funds for social care provision by 2020.

[https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/feb/26/council-tax-hikes-will-not-stop-cuts-to-local-services-authorities-warn?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/feb/26/council-tax-hikes-will-not-stop-cuts-to-local-services-authorities-warn?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting here that the feminist ethics of care literature offer an alternative formulation based on recognition of the interdependence of social being. Rather than a right of citizenship, care is offered as a basis for political decisions cognizant of people's needs. necessary "so that we may live in [the world] as well as possible" (Tronto 1995, 143).

<sup>9</sup> Although immigration is a reserved power in the UK, e.g. not devolved to member countries, there are significant national variations. For instance, since 2015, it is a statutory duty in Scotland to provide formal guardianship for unaccompanied minors <https://beta.gov.scot/policies/refugees-and-asylum-seekers/unaccompanied-children/>.

<sup>10</sup> A significant partiality here is evident given the absence of the perspectives of separated children. This is the focus of our ongoing research.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-national-transfer-scheme-for-migrant-children>

<sup>12</sup> This refers to the contradiction for capitalist states between a demand for workers who are ready and able to work for capital and the costs of feeding, clothing, housing, educating, and caring for said workers.